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Security Council

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6409th meeting

Thursday, 18 December 2008, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Jurica	(Croatia)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Grauls
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Tiendrébéogo
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Weisleder
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir John Sawers
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff
	Viet Nam	Mr. Bui The Giang

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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08-65913 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received letters from the representatives of Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Iceland, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Japan, Lebanon, Morocco, Norway, Pakistan, Qatar, the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in which they request to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite those representatives to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Ms. Shalev (Israel) took a seat at the Council table; the other aforementioned representatives took the seats reserved for them at the side of the Council Chamber.

The President: I would like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 11 December 2008 from the Chargé d'affaires of the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations, which will be issued as document S/2008/794 and which reads as follows:

> "I have the honour to request that, in accordance with its previous practice, the Security Council will invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in the meeting of the Security Council which will be held on Thursday, 18 December 2008, regarding the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question."

I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Mansour (Palestine) took a seat at the Council table.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Serry to take a seat at the Council table.

I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 15 December 2008 from His Excellency Mr. Paul Badji, Permanent Representative of Senegal, in which he requests to be invited, in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. If I hear no objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Paul Badji.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

I invite Mr. Badji to take the seat reserved for him at the side of the Council Chamber.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General. I now give Mr. Serry the floor.

Mr. Serry: I am honoured to brief the Council two days after the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008). The Secretary-General welcomes this timely and important resolution, which embodies the principles on which Israeli-Palestinian peace must rest. The resolution came a day after the Quartet affirmed the need to intensify the political process and address acute challenges on the ground. The Secretary-General also chaired a meeting of the Quartet with members and

representatives of the League of Arab States in a framework of collaboration that is essential to the search for peace in the region. The international community has sent a clear and united message of its commitment to the irreversibility of the process leading to the creation of a Palestinian State living in peace alongside a secure Israel.

Preparations for the Israeli general election scheduled for 10 February 2009 have continued, with many political parties holding primaries. A new United States administration takes office on 20 January. There are also internal challenges on the Palestinian side. We are therefore in a period of transition. The immediate priority is to sustain the process during transition by building a solid bridge to carry us through the fragile period ahead. In this regard, a priority must be to ensure calm in and around Gaza and to urgently improve humanitarian conditions. The decision of the Arab League to ensure no vacuum on the Palestinian side, support the legitimate Palestinian Government and pursue Palestinian unity demands support. It is critically important to pursue specific action items to continue improving conditions on the ground in the West Bank. We must protect, preserve and, where possible, advance the three tracks of the Annapolis process — negotiations, institution-building and phase 1 Road Map implementation — and set the stage for a decisive push for peace in 2009.

Let me turn first to the situation in and around Gaza. Six months ago today, a *tahdiya*, or calm, brokered by Egypt came into effect. After a period in which civilian casualties had reached alarming proportions, Palestinians and Israelis enjoyed a respite from daily terror and violence, and many civilian lives were doubtless saved.

But for the past six weeks, this calm has been gravely challenged. Since Mr. Pascoe briefed the Council on 25 November, a further four Palestinians, including two children, have been killed in Gaza and 18 others have been injured. Eight Israeli soldiers and four civilians have been injured by rocket and mortar attacks, more than 130 of which, including 30 in the past two days, were fired from Gaza towards Israeli towns and at the crossings through which civilians, United Nations and other humanitarian workers and all goods entering the Strip must pass. We condemn rocket attacks and call for their immediate cessation.

Egyptian efforts to secure the preservation and extension of the calm are continuing. Through ongoing contacts in Cairo, Israel and Gaza, we are strongly supporting these efforts. There have been heightened rhetoric and continued violence in recent days, with an increase in rocket-firing and a resumption of Israeli air strikes. I am extremely concerned by statements from Hamas that the calm expires today and questioning its renewal. A major escalation of violence would have grave consequences for the protection of civilians in Israel and Gaza, the welfare of the Gazan civilian population, and the sustainability of political efforts. On behalf of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, I make today a direct and urgent appeal for the calm to be respected and extended.

I also strongly appeal for basic humanitarian principles to be continuously observed. During the reporting period, access has been restricted for goods coming into the Strip, as well as for diplomats, United Nations staff and humanitarian workers and international press. Between 23 November and 17 December, 614 truckloads of supplies entered Gaza — a daily average of 29. The daily average in October was 123, and in May last year it was 475. Small amounts of supplies have been brought into Gaza by sea.

The unprecedented level of closure of crossing points into Gaza has caused unacceptable hardship to the civilian population. As of today, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has had again to suspend, for the time being, all food distributions. Price increases have resulted in Gazans now spending approximately two thirds of their income on food. There are also reported shortages of some food items, as well as cooking gas. Limitations on cash allowed into Gaza have left beneficiaries of humanitarian organizations, Palestinian Authority employees and pensioners unable to collect salaries, pensions and welfare payments, and forced UNRWA to suspend cash assistance to 94,000 beneficiaries. A one-time transfer of 100 million new Israeli shekels has alleviated this crisis for now, but as stressed in a recent letter from Quartet Representative Blair and the Presidents of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, a predictable mechanism for the transfer of cash is required.

Reductions in the import of fuel have resulted in regular power outages across Gaza. Half of Gaza City's population receives water only once a week for a few

hours, and other areas of Gaza receive water for a few hours on alternating days. United Nations projects worth over $150 million, including six priority projects identified by the Secretary-General in May, remain suspended due to a lack of materials.

The Secretary-General outlined his concerns on conditions in Gaza in a letter delivered to his Quartet colleagues last week. We welcome the call of the Quartet for the provision of humanitarian supplies — including food, fuel, pharmaceuticals, water and sewage maintenance items — to the people in Gaza to be assured continuously. The Quartet also reiterated its previous call for Israel to allow into Gaza sufficient materials to facilitate the resumption of stalled United Nations and other donor projects. We continue to seek more effective communication and cooperation with the Government of Israel to ensure that the United Nations is able to execute its mandated programmes to the civilian population.

We also reiterate the call of the Quartet for the immediate release of Corporal Shalit. No progress has been reported on efforts to secure his release in exchange for Palestinian prisoner releases, and the International Committee of the Red Cross has not been granted access to him during his 28 months in captivity.

No Muslim pilgrims from Gaza were able to attend the hajj in Mecca prior to the Eid al-Adha holiday this year as a result of internal Palestinian divisions. The Palestinian Authority secured visas for some 3,000 pilgrims, but Hamas denied their exit through Rafah crossing.

I have detailed the security, humanitarian and development dimensions of the Gaza crisis, but it is also a deep political crisis, threatening the unified basis on which a future Palestinian State, and the two-State solution itself, must rest.

Last Sunday, on the occasion of the twenty-first anniversary of Hamas, Hamas leader Haniyeh challenged the continuation in office of President Abbas pending a resolution of the internal divide. While calling for Palestinian reunification, he did so on a basis that rejected agreements signed and commitments undertaken by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). President Abbas has publicly raised the possibility of calling elections if reconciliation is not achieved.

When foreign ministers of the League of Arab States met in Cairo on 26 November in Cairo, they called on President Abbas to continue his mandate until such time as Palestinian reconciliation is possible and presidential and legislative elections can be held simultaneously in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. They affirmed basic terms for such reunification and their continued support for efforts to achieve it, so as to reunite Gaza and the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

The Quartet noted that position when it met on Monday, reaffirming its well-known principles and stressing that restoring Palestinian unity, based on the commitments of the PLO, would be an important step forward. Security Council resolution 1850 (2008) did likewise. I urge Hamas to respond positively to those exhortations. It cannot be in the interests of the Palestinian people for essential cornerstones of Palestinian legitimacy and national aspirations to be challenged.

I now turn to the situation in the West Bank, where, during the reporting period, two Palestinian militants were killed and 79 civilians injured in Israel Defense Force and settler violence. Most of those injuries were incurred during anti-barrier demonstrations. Despite the adversities on the ground, the efforts of the Palestinian Authority, together with unprecedented donor support and improved Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, are enhancing security and creating prospects for economic improvements. I continue to work closely with Prime Minister Fayyad to support those efforts of Palestinian self-empowerment and to promote further-reaching measures by the Israelis to enable those efforts, so as to produce a paradigm shift on the ground.

Palestinian Authority security forces continue their efforts to impose law and order and meet the Road Map commitments on security throughout the West Bank. Efforts are continuing in Jenin and Nablus, forces were deployed in Hebron several weeks ago and deployment in Bethlehem has begun ahead of the Christmas celebrations.

Despite the 620 obstacles to movement and access that remain across the West Bank, an easing of restrictions around the Nablus area was instituted on 7 December. We strongly encourage further steps to ease movement and access, given the significant improvements in security on the ground. We also

welcome the release on 15 December of 227 Palestinian prisoners as a gesture to President Abbas.

Between 27 and 29 November, a trade fair took place in Jenin, attended by approximately 200,000 Palestinians. Around 4,500 Palestinian citizens of Israel came to Jenin on that occasion — the largest such influx to Jenin for over seven years. An investment conference in London on 15 December, hosted by Prime Minister Gordon Brown and attended by Prime Minister Fayyad, Quartet Representative Blair and Palestinian and international business people, showcased new business partnerships formed since the Bethlehem Investment Conference in May, and forged more such partnerships.

The Palestinian Authority has finalized and presented its budget for 2009, which foresees continued fiscal adjustment and reforms and envisages a shift in expenditure from recurrent items towards development projects, especially community projects. There is an urgent need to secure adequate and predictable financing from donors to finance the recurrent deficit for 2009.

The overall challenge is to take the incremental steps that have been implemented, intensify and multiply them and make them transformative. One key element is further action to implement the measures of Quartet Representative Blair, including full observance of the moratorium on house demolitions, additional steps in the northern West Bank, further removal of specified movement restrictions, actions to build confidence in East Jerusalem, and further measures in Area C.

Another key element is action on the Road Map commitments. In the reporting period, illegal Israeli settlement activity continued in the majority of settlements in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, and Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem remain closed. Contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, construction of the barrier continues in deviation from the Green Line within occupied Palestinian territory.

We continue to call on Israel to implement its Road Map commitments. We urge any new Israeli Government to decisively address the question of settlement expansion, which threatens the two-State solution itself. Israel must also refrain from unilateral actions in Jerusalem that alter the status quo or undermine trust.

We welcome the evacuation by Israeli security forces of settlers from a house in Hebron on 4 December. We urge further action by Israel to remove settler outposts in accordance with the Road Map and address the growing threat of settler extremism. That threat was made clear in the aftermath of the evacuation in Hebron, when settlers and their supporters rioted through areas of the city under Israeli, and later Palestinian, security control, attacking Palestinian civilians, torching and damaging cars, houses and public buildings, desecrating mosques and graves and uprooting olive trees. We unequivocally condemn that violence, in which 14 Palestinians were injured. I welcome the reaction of the Security Council on that issue and remind Israel of its obligation to protect the civilian Palestinian population under occupation.

I was in contact myself with the governor of Hebron and the Israeli authorities during the crisis to support efforts to end the violence. I commend the restraint of Palestinian Authority security forces and the efforts made by the parties to ensure that that incident was contained, and I note the forceful denunciation of the settler attacks by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert.

I turn now to the search for regional stability and peace, on which I have held consultations in Damascus, Amman and Cairo during the reporting period. No further rounds of indirect Israeli-Syrian talks have taken place, but we look forward to their continuation and intensification. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan remains quiet, but Israeli settlement activity continues.

Important efforts to promote comprehensive regional peace were made in the reporting period, including a joint letter from Prince Saud Al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Amre Moussa, to United States President-elect Obama, underscoring the commitment of the Arab world to the comprehensive proposal made in the Arab Peace Initiative.

In Lebanon, the situation has been relatively quiet during this past month. The various initiatives taken by political leaders at national and local levels to bring a measure of stability to the country have, in general terms, continued to hold. Nevertheless, a limited number of isolated security incidents took place

throughout the country, all of which were contained without sparking further violence.

On 11 December, Lebanon and Syria exchanged official documents on the locations of their future respective embassies in Damascus and Beirut. Visits by Lebanese officials and party leaders to Syria have continued. On 10 November, the Lebanese Interior Minister held talks with his Syrian counterpart in Damascus on matters of security coordination. The two Ministers agreed to establish a committee to follow up and coordinate security issues between the two countries. On 28 November, Lebanese Army commander, General Kahwaji, paid a visit to Syria and discussed cooperation between the armies of both countries with his counterpart and with President Assad. Lebanese Member of Parliament Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, went on a five-day visit to Syria.

As called for by the election law adopted earlier this year, the 10 members of the Election Campaign Supervisory Commission, charged with ensuring compliance with regulatory provisions on campaign spending and media coverage, were appointed during a cabinet session on 13 December. In the context of the run-up to the 2009 legislative elections, prominent Lebanese political leaders have continued reaching out to one another in an effort to ease tensions. For example, on 27 October, a meeting took place between the leader of the majority bloc, Member of Parliament Saad Hariri, and the Secretary-General of Hezbollah for the first time in 30 months.

While rubble removal and reconstruction in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared continue, underfunding of the current appeals for relief of the displaced and for reconstruction of the camp remains a serious concern. Recent pledges include $1 million from the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund.

The situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been generally quiet during the past month. UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces have continued coordinated operational activities throughout the area south of the Litani River. Israeli air violations continued during the past month.

To conclude, after nearly a year as the Secretary-General's envoy based in Jerusalem, I and my team at the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process continue to actively pursue contacts with the parties in the region and with Quartet colleagues, in order to contain crises and find solutions to immediate concerns on the ground, particularly in Gaza. We are continuing to promote compliance with commitments and obligations, support dialogue and negotiations on the core issues, and advance the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1515 (2003) and, now, 1850 (2008).

An important platform for peace has been established in 2008 thanks to the efforts of the parties and the support of the international community. The challenge now is to build on that platform and turn the promise of peace into reality. I am convinced that that can, and must, be done. The diplomatic process and improvements on the ground must reinforce each other and move swiftly forward. A comprehensive peace in the region, with an end of occupation and the creation of a Palestinian State living at peace with Israel at its heart, is possible, necessary and urgent.

The President: I thank Mr. Serry for his briefing.

In accordance, with the understanding reached among Council members, I should like to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes, in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously. Speakers with lengthy statements are kindly requested to circulate their texts in the Chamber and to deliver a condensed version when speaking.

I now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): I would like to reiterate our thanks to you, Mr. President, for your able stewardship of the Security Council this month. I should also like to express our appreciation to Mr. Robert Serry for his comprehensive briefing to the Council. As we approach the end of 2008, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute and bid farewell to the outgoing members of the Council. We would like to express our deepest appreciation for their tireless efforts and immense contributions to maintaining and strengthening international peace and security.

We come before the Security Council two days after adoption of resolution 1850 (2008), the first resolution adopted by the Council with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in more than four and half

years despite the many serious issues and crises that have arisen in that period requiring the Council's urgent attention and action. The Council's inability to pronounce itself on the situation has prevented it from playing its rightful role under the Charter to address an issue of central relevance to the maintenance of international peace and security, thereby harming its credibility and depriving us of its contribution, to the detriment of our collective efforts to achieve peace.

The Security Council's efforts to address current developments — including the intensification of illegal Israeli settlements, the frustration of attempts to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian population in the besieged Gaza Strip, the rise of settler violence in the occupied Palestinian territory and the status of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process — are therefore welcome and signal the Council's reassertion of its authority and its intention to play a more active role in advancing a peaceful settlement.

We have always appealed for the Security Council's engagement and called upon it to shoulder its responsibilities. Therefore, despite serious misgivings about the exclusionary process and limited scope, we welcome the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008). Moreover, we again urge the Council not only to remain seized of the matter but to actively follow up and implement its relevant resolutions, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1515 (2003) and now 1850 (2008), in order to contribute tangibly to the achievement of a two-State solution that includes a sovereign, independent, contiguous and viable State of Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security on the basis of the 1967 borders. That must remain among the Council's priorities for a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that most benefits the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. It will also vastly enhance the prospects for regional and international peace and stability.

In that regard, we join Arab ministers, the Quartet and the many Council members who have emphasized the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and of seizing the historic opportunity it provides to make peace and coexistence a reality in our region. Along with the resolutions of the Security Council and the Madrid principles, which constitute the basis of the peace process, the Initiative and the Road Map are integral to the Annapolis process, which has received wide international support and whose irreversibility the Council has affirmed. All efforts and practical measures must be exerted to advance that process in a way that justly resolves all core issues — including those of Jerusalem, borders, Palestinian refugees, settlements, water, security and prisoners — and leads to the conclusion of a peace treaty and the end of decades of our people's statelessness, occupation and suffering.

The Palestinian people, under the leadership of their sole legitimate representative, the Palestine Liberation Organization, remain determined to achieve justice and to live in peace and security in their homeland, side by side with their neighbours. Indeed, since the declaration of independence 20 years ago, the Palestinian leadership has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to negotiations aimed at ending the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and achieving the two-State solution for peace. Accordingly, the Palestinian Authority has upheld its obligations in good faith under all agreements reached and made every possible effort to fulfil its Road Map and Annapolis commitments.

We all know what is needed to make peace, and yet peace has for too long eluded us. Any impartial examination of the situation on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territory and of the peace process in the past year leads us to the same conclusion. Despite the high hopes and momentum generated by the Annapolis Conference and despite some progress in certain areas, the situation has continued to deteriorate and minimal progress has been made towards peace. Once again, the intertwined and mutually reinforcing nature of the process and developments on the ground has been harshly confirmed. Negative developments on the ground have continued to undermine efforts to advance the peace process. At the same time, the failure to adhere to peace process commitments and to undertake steps for building confidence and improving the situation on the ground have continued to intensify tensions and exacerbate already difficult conditions.

As we reflect on that reality, it is incumbent upon us to ask the following questions. Why — despite the international presence and the promises of Annapolis, despite United States leadership, despite commitments made and despite reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative and the various efforts exerted to support the peace process — have we been unable to make the required progress? What has happened in the year since Annapolis that has prevented us from concluding a peace treaty by the target date of the end of this year, as we were promised?

We need a moment of truth, a reality check and serious answers. Only that will enable us to pinpoint what has gone wrong and to determine what needs to be done henceforth to avoid the pitfalls, repeated failures and deterioration of the past and to put the process on an accelerated track towards the achievement of its stated goals.

In that connection, we agreed to the Quartet proposal for United States supervision and monitoring of the process and developments on the ground. It is our understanding that a report has in fact been prepared by United States General Fraser, yet we have not seen it. We believe that, at a minimum, it should be shared with the Quartet and the Council, not for the purpose of pointing fingers or blaming anyone but in order to know what the obstacles before us are so that they can be removed from the path of the process. The following must be determined. First, who is upholding his obligations and who is not? Secondly, what needs to be done to create appropriate conditions on the ground and between the parties to advance the process towards the attainment of the two-State solution based on United Nations resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map.

While we continue to await such a report, we are, of course, all aware of what has transpired in the year since Annapolis. Despite the commitments made, the repeated calls of the Quartet and its very clear obligations under international law, Israel, the occupying Power, continues to behave on the ground as if there were no peace process and no prior agreements reached and as though it were immune from the laws that govern international relations, including situations of foreign occupation.

Even as the international community revelled in the high of Annapolis, Israel continued its deviant behaviour, persisting with its illegal policies against the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. However, the Security Council and the Quartet have remained incapable of or unwilling to act to bring an end to such Israeli policies and to constructively support the parties in doing what must be done to truly achieve peace.

In the run-up to Annapolis and continuously thereafter, Israel persisted in tightening its siege of the Gaza Strip, in massive collective punishment of the Palestinian civilians there, and continued, particularly in early 2008, to use excessive force against the population, deepening the tragic humanitarian situation in Gaza. Here, we repeat that there is no justification whatsoever for such illegal collective punishment of a people.

We have appealed to the Council on several occasions to act to compel Israel to cease its military attacks, ensure protection of the civilian population and cease the illegal, punitive measures by which it is deliberately causing a human catastrophe in the Gaza Strip. This has included repeated calls for the opening of the border crossings and implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access. But the international community has only been able to provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance, which the occupying Power also continues to obstruct with impunity, and has failed to act decisively on the political front to address this crisis and bring Israel into compliance with its obligations under international law, including humanitarian and human rights law.

Immediately after Annapolis, it was also revealed that Israel was pressing on with its colonization campaign, in grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Indeed, contrary to United Nations resolutions and the commitments made at Annapolis and despite repeated calls by the Quartet for respect of the Road Map obligation to freeze settlements and dismantle outposts, Israel has done the exact opposite, escalating the construction and expansion of settlements and the wall, particularly in East Jerusalem.

This obviously requires a concrete response by the Quartet, which should put in place a mechanism to bring Israel into compliance with the call to freeze all settlement activities, including natural growth. The inability to do so has sent the wrong message to the occupying Power, on the one hand allowing it to intensify settlement activities and on the other providing fertile ground for the escalation of settler terror, violence, harassment and intimidation against Palestinian civilians and properties, as recently witnessed in the appalling recent events in Al-Khalil.

Another area where the absence of such a mechanism has undermined the process is the issue of the checkpoints and movement and access restrictions. Despite the Annapolis commitments and the Quartet's numerous calls for the easing of movement and access, we have witnessed an intensification of Israeli restrictions under the pretext of security, with an

increase of at least 100 more obstacles in the West Bank and the isolation of East Jerusalem in particular. Paradoxically, this has occurred at the very same time that reports from all concerned parties are praising Palestinian Authority efforts to promote law and order, particularly in cities like Jenin, in fulfilment of our obligations and underscoring the importance and benefits of such progress and cooperation on the security front. Also, even as this cooperation continues, Israel is still carrying out raids and arrests, which undermine our efforts and which, despite the recent release of some prisoners, ensures the continued imprisonment of at least 11,000 Palestinians.

On the ground, all of this has resulted in further fragmentation of the occupied Palestinian territory, the imposition of deeper socio-economic deprivation on the Palestinian people, the heightening of frustrations and tensions, and a weakening of hope and belief in the peace process.

With the persistence of such complexities and behaviour completely contradictory to that required for a just resolution, it is imperative to ask: how can we bring the peace process to a successful conclusion in the year 2009? We believe that that the responsibility falls upon the Quartet and the Security Council to devise a practical mechanism to address these issues in a situation where one party repeatedly fails to respond to calls and to fulfil its obligations, miring us in a cyclical process with no end in sight. Such a mechanism is necessary to help us overcome the current obstacles and stagnation, avoid the same mistakes and deterioration, and allow the peace process to advance to a successful conclusion.

We have tried to be constructive by identifying what has prevented us from achieving a peace treaty in 2008 and by calling for serious efforts to address the issues that have repeatedly hampered the peace process. This will be the greatest contribution in support of the peace process and to assisting the parties to advance their ongoing bilateral negotiations. This is what we believe will enhance our chances for avoiding the disappointment, failure and despair that the continuation of this conflict would bring and for finally realizing peace in 2009.

Thus, even during the current transitional period, while we maintain our high expectations and hopes for the Annapolis process, we expect the Security Council and the Quartet to uphold their responsibilities and to exert the needed practical measures to ensure that obligations are met and that the parties refrain from any steps undermining confidence or prejudicing the outcome of negotiations.

In this regard, we reiterate our hope that the ceasefire will continue to be upheld and will be extended to the West Bank. Moreover, we express appreciation to our Egyptian brothers and also for the most recent Arab ministerial meeting for the efforts exerted to help us achieve Palestinian reconciliation. We will continue to work cooperatively with our Egyptian brothers to regain Palestinian national unity in all its aspects, a goal that is so essential for our just cause.

In conclusion, I express our deep hope that 2009 will indeed be the year in which we bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the tragedy of our peoples with the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, the cornerstone of which is the two-State solution. We look forward to the day when the Palestinian people will exercise their inalienable rights, including their right to self-determination; live in freedom and dignity in their independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital; and when we can together open a new chapter of peace, security and coexistence in our region.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Ms. Shalev (Israel): At the outset, I wish to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your leadership of the Council for this month, which has been demanding and complicated. I also wish to thank Mr. Robert Serry for his informative and important briefing.

As we approach the end of 2008, we look back on a year that has witnessed substantial progress in the framework of the Annapolis process. In fact, this year has been a most constructive year for the peace process.

Allow me to begin by congratulating the Security Council on its adoption of resolution 1850 (2008) just two days ago. This resolution expresses unequivocal support for the direct bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in the framework of the Annapolis process. According to the principles agreed by the parties themselves and presented to the Quartet, any agreement will be subject to implementation of the

Road Map, first and foremost to the principle requiring the dismantling of the terrorist infrastructure.

Further, resolution 1850 (2008) includes additional important principles. The resolution endorses — for the first time — the three Quartet principles as the basis for international legitimacy and support for any Palestinian Government. In so doing, the international community has delivered a clear message to Hamas in Gaza.

The resolution supports the moderate elements in the region. We must not let radicals in the region hijack the agenda for their extremist purposes. The resolution rightly notes that lasting peace can only be based on ending terror and incitement and on a commitment to the two-State solution. Additionally, resolution 1850 (2008) calls for the States of the Middle East to create an environment conducive to bilateral negotiations. That includes promoting mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence in the region, in parallel with progress in the bilateral process.

The real test now lies with the parties on the ground. Let us not forget that Israel is operating on two major tracks. On the one hand, Israel is trying to promote peace with the moderate, responsible leadership on the Palestinian side. On the other hand, Israel is fighting the extremist Hamas terrorist organization in the Gaza Strip.

In spite of the efforts by those who promote incitement, fear and terror, Israelis and Palestinians in the region have demonstrated increasing courage during the past twelve months of negotiations. These negotiations have resulted in important changes on the ground.

Let me mention several key developments. There exists growing cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces. In this regard, Israel has facilitated the deployment of Palestinian police forces in Jenin and the area around Hebron, as well as the opening of 20 additional Palestinian police stations. The city of Jenin — once a breeding ground for suicide terrorism — is now a model for security cooperation in the West Bank.

That progress is important but must be considered in the wider context of the capacity-building of the Palestinian security forces. The United States, the European Union, and certain Arab States play an important role in this regard. In the past year alone, Palestinian wages in the West Bank have increased almost 25 per cent; trade and commerce between Israel and the West Bank have jumped 35 per cent.

All of these developments are important. However, much work remains to be done to build the effective Palestinian capacity to fully implement Palestinian responsibilities. Ongoing terrorist activity in the West Bank remains a threat to Israel and requires us to act accordingly.

Israel remains committed to doing its part to create a positive environment on the ground, one that encourages moderates in the region. In honour of Eid al-Adha and as a confidence-building measure towards the Palestinian Authority and its leadership — Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad — the Israeli Government has released, this week, 230 convicted Palestinian prisoners.

Through this latest gesture, Israel seeks to intensify its continuing dialogue with partners who are both committed to negotiations and diplomacy and opposed to terrorism. But confidence-building measures by Israel must be met by the Palestinians, as well as by the wider Arab world. The Arab world has a responsibility, namely, to engage in measures that will facilitate the negotiations between the parties, including a clear message against any incitement of and support for terrorism.

While the efforts of Israel and the Palestinian Authority have led to some important accomplishments, serious and dangerous challenges and obstacles remain. This month has witnessed yet another onslaught of rockets and mortars fired at civilians in Israeli towns and cities. This year my country has been the target of a record number of attacks; over 2,900 rockets and mortars were fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel. The same day on which the Security Council adopted resolution 1850 (2008), 11 rockets were fired at Israel. Yesterday alone, 25 rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel, one of which landed at the entrance of a busy supermarket.

The incessant attacks by Hamas also target border crossings, fuel depots and other vital routes that normally enable the flow of goods and humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, Israel acknowledges the need to provide humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, and we do our utmost to facilitate the work of the international community.

At this very moment, Corporal Gilad Shalit has remained in Hamas captivity for 910 days and nights. As a human being and as a mother, I was appalled to hear about a rally that took place in the centre of Gaza City celebrating 21 years of the establishment of Hamas. 150,000 people gathered and cheered for a show that mocked the misery of Gilad Shalit, the suffering of his family and the compassion of the people of Israel and people around the world. We expect the international community to do its utmost to bring Gilad Shalit home safely.

The Hamas terrorists of Gaza who relentlessly attack Israel do not act alone. Iran remains the epicentre of Hamas' ongoing terrorist work. Iran, like Syria, actively trains, funds, and equips Hamas, as well as Hizbullah to our north, and many other radicals in the region. Israel also remains deeply concerned by the rearmament and redeployment of Hizbullah in Lebanon — both north and south of the Litani River — in violation of relevant Security Council resolutions.

Israel is fully committed to the peace process. We hope that 2009 will enable us to further the cause of peace in our region. Peace remains the salient goal for the State of Israel. To all of my colleagues at the United Nations, I would like to offer my delegation's sincere wishes for the holiday season and a fruitful New Year.

Mr. Sawers (United Kingdom): My delegation thanks the Special Coordinator for his briefing today. We listened very carefully to the very full contributions from Ambassadors Mansour and Shalev, and I thank them for their statements.

This debate comes very soon after the Security Council discussions on Tuesday. Today is an opportunity to hear the views of the parties and other Member States, as we ourselves made clear in the earlier Council debate. But, let me begin, as others have, by welcoming the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008).

Since the last ministerial meeting to discuss the Middle East last summer, we have seen momentum steadily build towards a greater Security Council role in the Middle East peace process. Resolution 1850 (2008) is an important milestone in a series of resolutions, including 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003). Taken together, these resolutions set out the goals of the peace and the framework for the peace process. Resolution 1850 (2008) serves to underline the key points that we believe are essential for progress towards a lasting settlement.

First, let me stress the importance of building on the current negotiations, including both the Israel-Palestine and the Israel-Syria tracks. Secondly, both parties need to fill their commitments under the Road Map. For Israel, this means taking action to freeze settlement building and improving conditions for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. For Palestinians, it means finding a way to reunite around negotiations and non-violence, with Hamas ceasing their rocket attacks and moving towards the Quartet principles.

Thirdly, it sets out the need for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, with all States in the region and the wider international community working to build an atmosphere conducive to the negotiations. We welcome the specific reference in the resolution to the Arab Peace Initiative and the Arab engagement on the peace process that lies behind that initiative. As Foreign Secretary Miliband said in his intervention on Tuesday, resolving the Middle East conflict will require more than a two-State solution; it will require Israel and all Arab States to live side by side in security.

The Security Council resolution follows the recent and highly significant letter from the Arab League to President-elect Obama calling for a comprehensive solution to the Middle East peace process and signalling the willingness of the Arab world to work with the new United States Administration on this issue. And the resolution also follows the European Council declaration made on 12 December setting out strong European Union support for and participation in the efforts to achieve a negotiated solution. Taken together, those developments give us momentum to make real progress in 2009 and we look forward to an early commitment from the next United States Administration to sustaining the peace process from the start of its term in office.

The political process is inseparable from the situation on the ground. We welcome the emphasis that resolution 1850 (2008) gives to the development of Palestinian capacity and the development of the institutions of a Palestinian State. The United Kingdom, along with the European Union, continues to support the Palestinian Authority in improving its

security forces and in building up its economy, both of which we believe will lead in time to better security for Israel and a lessening of tensions.

Insecurity in the wider Middle East region, not least the activities of Iran, makes the need for progress in peace negotiations between Israel and its neighbours ever more urgent. The United Kingdom supports the statement made by the Quartet this week and their continued work in engaging with the parties and galvanizing the international community. The United Kingdom will continue to work closely with those in the region and beyond to reinforce the peace process and we will work within the Security Council to build on the authority and direction that the Council engagement has given and will continue to give to the peace process.

Mr. Mantovani (Italy): I would like first of all to thank Special Coordinator Serry for his very informative briefing today and to acknowledge the presence here with us of the Permanent Observer of Palestine, Ambassador Mansour, and of the Permanent Representative of Israel, Ambassador Shalev. I also wish to align my statement with the one that will be delivered by France on behalf of the European Union later on.

Italy welcomes the landmark adoption of resolution 1850 (2008) last Tuesday. We commend the United States and the Russian Federation for their leadership, and we are fully aware of the importance of the strong message of support to the negotiation process that has come from this Council. Resolution 1850 (2008) gives a key message: the Annapolis Process is irreversible; there is no way back. It is absolutely essential that a comprehensive agreement be reached in the form of a peace treaty to be implemented without further negotiations based on the Road Map principles.

We devoted our statement on Tuesday to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, I will not repeat what I said on that occasion regarding the situation on the ground. I should like only to recall our belief in the importance of supporting and promoting a constructive approach by all the States of the region to every track of the peace process and to underline in this context the great potential of the Arab League's Peace Initiative.

I will now turn to Lebanon. We are pleased with the encouraging developments in the national reconciliation process in Lebanon. We are aware, however, that the country's stability is still fragile owing to the ongoing security problems and a substantial lack of progress in fostering reconciliation between the Christian factions. The upcoming elections are thus a crucial step in the process of stabilizing Lebanese democracy. It is our hope that they will take place in the framework of a peaceful and democratic electoral campaign. The presence of electoral observers could help to reduce tensions and assure the proper conduct of both the pre-electoral phase and the elections. Italy is ready to contribute to a possible European mission, should one be requesting by all the Lebanese political forces and receive unanimous agreement from the Siniora Government.

Italy reiterates its hope that the pending territorial issues between Israel and Lebanon will be solved promptly. In this context, it is particularly urgent that Israel withdraw from the northern part of the village of Gajar, so as to end the ongoing tensions in the area and improve Israeli-Lebanese political relations, which is a prerequisite for constructively tackling the remaining open issues between the two countries. We thus believe it necessary for the plan outlined by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to be implemented as quickly as possible. We encourage both sides to continue cooperating with UNIFIL in the framework of the tripartite mechanism so as to solve problems on the ground, prevent incidents and proceed with the demarcation of the Blue Line. Italy will continue to contribute its contingent to UNIFIL to ensure the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) and the maintenance of the ceasefire. We believe that the presence of UNIFIL remains decisive for the stability of Lebanon and the security of Israel.

We also hope that Syria will formally recognize Lebanon's sovereignty over the Sheba'a Farms area by providing written confirmation in response to the Secretary-General's request. We also hope that Syria and Lebanon will quickly follow up on their commitments by exchanging ambassadors and demarking their shared borders so as to place the newly-established relations between the two countries on a sound footing in a manner based on mutual respect for independence and sovereignty.

Mr. Wolff (United States of America): I would like to join others in thanking Special Coordinator Serry for his detailed briefing on the situation in the Middle East today.

I would like to make two main points regarding our discussions. First, we welcome the adoption of Security Council resolution 1850 (2008). It is a positive and forward-looking document that has put the Security Council and the international community on record as confirming the irreversibility of the bilateral negotiations and endorsing the parties' efforts to achieve an agreement. As the Quartet stated on 15 December, a lasting peace will results from the parties' mutually reinforcing efforts on the political track in building the institutions of the Palestinian State, improving conditions on the ground and in implementing their Road Map obligations. The resolution reiterates the importance of fulfilling those obligations and stresses that neither party should undertake any activity that contravenes those Road Map obligations or prejudices the final status negotiation. The United States has made very clear its view on settlement activity and on the Palestinian Authority's obligation to dismantle the infrastructure of terror in its territories, reform security services and end incitement.

On 15 December, the Quartet called for negotiations to be intensified in order to put an end to the conflict and to establish as soon as possible the State of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security with Israel. In parallel, the resolution underlines that a solution to the conflict should be aligned with efforts to achieve a broader regional peace and notes the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative. As Secretary of State Rice told the Council on 16 December, "as Arab States should reach out to Israel, so should Israel reach out to Arab States" (*S/PV.6045*).

The second point I would like to underscore today is our continuing concern for the welfare of the innocent people of Gaza and in the towns and cities of southern Israel. As the Quartet made clear at its meeting this week, a lasting solution to the situation in Gaza can only be achieved through peaceful means. Restoring Palestinian unity based on the commitments of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the legitimate and internationally recognized representative of the Palestinian people, to non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous commitments and obligations are central to this process.

The Quartet, again in its 15 December statement, expressed its concern that the Egyptian-brokered calm in Gaza has been challenged, condemned the indiscriminate attacks against Israel and called for a cessation of violence, including attacks against commercial crossings that prevent the import of humanitarian supplies and basic commodities without which the people of Gaza will continue to suffer.

As the largest single-State contributor of aid to the Palestinian people, the United States is deeply committed to seeing through the delivery of humanitarian aid. The United States calls for the continuous provision of humanitarian supplies to the people of Gaza.

Nonetheless, the Council should not lose sight of the root cause of the current situation. While the vast majority of the people of Gaza simply want to get on with their lives, Hamas, which usurped control from the legitimate Palestinian Authority, and other groups, continue to instigate violence, launching more than 200 rocket and mortar attacks in the past two months against Israel and humanitarian aid crossing points into Gaza, as we heard earlier this morning from Mr. Serry.

The United States calls for an immediate and permanent end to these attacks, which present an ongoing threat to international peace and security. We also call for the full dismantlement of the infrastructure of terrorism, according to the agreed Road Map obligations. The United States also calls for the immediate release of Corporal Gilad Shalit.

Continuing progress in Jenin, and the successful deployment of the Palestinian security services to Hebron are strong counter-examples to the violence in Gaza. These developments demonstrate that Israelis and Palestinians can work together to advance the cause of peace.

Finally, I would like to say just a short word on Lebanon. Full implementation of Security Council resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006) is vital to a peaceful and secure Lebanon. As with the establishment of the Special Tribunal, under Security Council resolution 1757 (2007), to try those responsible for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and others, the United States strongly supports the full implementation of these resolutions. We also urge that additional funds be pledged by Member States for years two and three of the Special Tribunal which should become fully functioning on 1 March 2009.

The Secretary-General's latest report on resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006) clearly expressed the importance of Hizbollah disarmament and of ending arms smuggling across the Lebanese-Syrian border. As the national dialogue in Lebanon progresses, we look forward to continuing efforts to implement these core elements of the resolutions.

Mr. Ripert (France) (*spoke in French*): First of all, I, too, would like to thank Mr. Serry for his briefing and the representatives of Palestine and Israel for their statements.

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union (EU) and would like to stress a few major points with regard to the peace process.

First, we welcome the adoption on Tuesday of resolution 1850 (2008), in which the Security Council once again addressed the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

The European Union shares the belief reflected in that resolution that the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process, which has been under way since the Annapolis conference, is irreversible and must be given the strongest possible support in order to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement as soon as possible. This agreement must provide for the creation of a Palestinian State that includes the West Bank and Gaza and is viable, independent, democratic and sovereign, living in peace and security side by side with Israel within secure and recognized borders, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

To this effect, the European Union calls for inter-Palestinian reconciliation. To achieve this, we support Egyptian mediation efforts and would support any Government that respects the Palestinian Liberation Organization's commitments, would strongly support peace negotiations with Israel and whose policy and actions reflect the Quartet's principles.

The second issue of major importance is that, like its European Union partners, France subscribes to a comprehensive approach to settling the Arab-Israeli conflict, as reflected in the resolution. We welcome in this regard the indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria under the auspices of Turkey and encourage the two parties to open direct talks.

We also welcome the Arab Peace Initiative, which we believe provides a solid and relevant basis for peace in the Middle East. It will also help us to include the Syrian and Lebanese tracks in our thinking, which we believe to be essential. In our view, the initiative calls for a continued, broad and constructive commitment from all parties involved.

However, this commitment presupposes strengthening mutual trust, which brings me to my third point. There is only one path towards mutual trust — quick and significant change on the ground, in compliance with the commitments entered into under the Road Map, the importance of which is quite rightly reiterated in the resolution.

In this regard, the Palestinian Authority has made major efforts with respect to security, governance and rule of law, especially in Jenin, Nablus and Hebron. It is clear that much remains to be done to stop terrorism and violence, irrespective of the perpetrating party. Nevertheless, the progress made by the Palestinian Authority in terms of security is undeniable.

We believe that this progress calls for reciprocal gestures from Israel, starting with the settlements issue. Accordingly, the European Union recalls that it is necessary and urgent to put an end to the settlements, which includes natural expansion, as well as expansion into East Jerusalem. Any other policy would damage the credibility of the negotiators and prejudge the outcome of the talks.

Restrictions on travel to and within the occupied Palestinian territories must be lifted, mainly to encourage economic development. The humanitarian situation in Gaza requires radical improvement, through the continuation of the truce, the reopening of the crossings and the provision of goods and services for the population.

The ability of the agencies responsible for providing assistance, especially the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, to do their jobs must be assured. Lastly, it is important that as many Palestinian prisoners as possible be released, with the initial priority given to minors.

The European Union condemns all forms of violence, especially in Gaza, as well as the firing of rockets against Israel, which must be halted. The fight against terrorism must continue unabated. Corporal Gilad Shalit must be unconditionally released.

Fourthly, the parties are naturally not the only ones with responsibilities. It is equally desirable for the international community as a whole to mobilize in

support of the Palestinian Authority. The European Union has done more than its fair share by continually increasing aid. Total EU aid to the Palestinian people, including humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance, will exceed €540 million this year, meaning that once again the EU and its member States make up the Palestinian Authority's largest contributors.

It is important to continue the work which began in Paris last December at the Donors' Conference for the Palestinian State. Budgetary aid totalling €1.7 billion has been paid so far and it is the responsibility of donors to meet their commitments.

The role of the international community is also political in nature. The European Union is determined to work to strengthen the Quartet's monitoring role on the ground, in collaboration with the United States and other Quartet members. In order to promote a lasting settlement, the European Union, without becoming involved in the negotiations or prejudging their results, has once more demonstrated that when the time comes, it is prepared to help implement a final peace agreement. The European Union recalls the importance of a continued, broad and constructive commitment by its Arab partners.

Lastly, as was emphasized by the heads of State and Government in the European Council declaration of 11 and 12 December, "We urge the United States, under its new Administration, to join us in making the Middle East peace process an immediate and central priority."

The European Union is convinced that to be sustainable, peace must be comprehensive. The European Union reiterates its commitment to resolving all aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in accordance with the terms of reference of the Madrid Conference, especially the principle of land for peace, the relevant Security Council resolutions and the Road Map.

Mr. Ettalhi (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) (*spoke in Arabic*): As I believe that this is the first open debate of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, since the Annapolis conference was held a year ago, perhaps it might be useful for us to consider the negotiation events of the past year and to draw certain lessons from them.

As Mr. Qurai', head of the Palestinian delegation, said about the negotiations, "I do not know if there were any agreements or possible agreements during that period." However, everyone is aware of what has been taking place on the ground, which clearly indicates the political will and serious resolve to bring an end to the occupation and the continued suffering of the Palestinians, which has lasted for more than 60 years.

Many people have cited statistics. Very briefly, I would like to cite a few statistics of my own to remind us of what has taken place on the ground since 27 November 2007. Over the past year, Israeli attacks against Palestinians increased by 300 per cent. The Israeli army carried out more than 1,700 operations in the West Bank and more than 1,363 in the Gaza Strip, 195 of them during the calm period. Those operations claimed the lives of 544 persons, including 71 children, and left more than 2,362 injured. The Israeli authorities destroyed 332 Palestinian homes and in turn authorized the construction of 2,210 dwellings in the West Bank settlements. The number of barriers restricting the movement of Palestinians in the West Bank increased from 581 to 630. Israel continued to build the wall, with all that that entailed in terms of the confiscation of Palestinian land — including recently the land of the village of Azzoun — given that 84 per cent of the wall is located in the territory of the West Bank. The Judaization of Al-Quds Al-Sharif was intensified; Israeli authorities continued to detain more than 11,000 Palestinians, including hundreds of children. It is regrettable that only one case of an Israeli detainee was highlighted but not those of thousands of Palestinians. While it is true that Israel freed 990 Palestinians during the same period, it also imprisoned another 4,950.

Those are only a few statistics. Unfortunately, they do not tell the whole story, so I shall make a number of clarifications, relying on Israeli testimony as appropriate. First, what Palestinians in the West Bank are experiencing in their daily lives are humiliation and mistreatment, restrictions on their movement, attacks by the Israeli army and settlers, and racial discrimination. Here, I shall quote from an account by an Israeli human rights organization: "The discrimination practiced by Israel in the West Bank increasingly recalls the apartheid system that prevailed in South Africa". That is a quote from an Israeli source. Here is a quote from another Israeli source:

> "In the areas occupied in 1967, the concentration of settlements in the occupied territories and the policies being implemented have created a

> situation of apartheid and discrimination in the institutions, and the principle of equality has been annihilated in the region. Two groups of citizens under the same legal authority experience two different systems of law: one group enjoys all its civil rights, while the second group is deprived of its rights. Thus, Israel has created a huge modern road network in the West Bank, but that network is for the use of Israelis alone, while Palestinians are forced to travel on dangerous and tortuous roads. The Israeli planning agency imposes restrictions on construction in Palestinian towns and villages, in contrast to the flexibility given to Israeli settlements. While the amount of water supplied to the settlements makes it possible to plant grass and fill pools, many Palestinians have to buy drinking water."

Therefore, we wonder: what is the objective of those practices in the West Bank, if not to make life impossible for Palestinians so that they must leave, joining the 6 million other Palestinian refugees, thus creating a reality that would make it impossible to establish a Palestinian State? These are not my words; they come from an Israeli human rights organization, which says, "The great change brought about by Israel in the mapping of the West Bank precludes any real possibility for the establishment of a Palestinian State."

Secondly, with regard to the total siege imposed on Gaza by the Israeli authorities, we all know that the general calm achieved in June was fully respected by the Palestinians. On 4 November, the Israeli army carried out an incursion into eastern Gaza, killing six Palestinians in an attack, so it was only natural that there should be a reaction from the Palestinians. Since 5 November, Israelis have openly imposed a total land, air and sea siege against Gaza, even denying entry to trucks of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. And perhaps members heard today's announcement that assistance to more than 750,000 Palestinians was being suspended because of an interruption in supplies. Of course, it is true that Israeli authorities open certain crossing points from time to time, but we wonder if that is only for propaganda purposes.

As a result of the siege, there has been a total paralysis of economic activity. Eighty per cent of Palestinian families now live below the poverty line. There has been a total collapse of drinking water and sanitation services; drinking water stations and sanitation facilities cannot function properly, and the Council can imagine the result. There is an almost total shortage of medical supplies in hospitals. There are also obstacles to the proper functioning of the banks and electricity stations that provide about 50 per cent of Gaza's electricity requirements. How can they call those actions and practices? They are what the Special Coordinator has described as "a flagrant violation of human rights" in Gaza, and I think that is the truth.

Over the course of the year, we witnessed something that we had not seen before — restrictions imposed on Palestinians and attacks against Palestinians. There are 650 settlers in Hebron — a town whose population includes more than 150,000 Palestinians — and that town is experiencing nearly daily attacks against Palestinians by settlers who destroy their homes and their property and do whatever they want under the protection of 2,000 Israeli soldiers. That is an outline of the results of Annapolis — the expansion of settlements, the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, human rights violations and increased violations of international law on the part of the occupation. All of that is unfolding within the silence of the Council, which can be understood by the victims only as a form of collusion, discrimination, bias or double standards being used against them. Those practices and the silence of the Council can only fuel hatred, frustration and despair. How can we follow the path to peace and coexistence in that manner?

If the Council seeks to guarantee the minimal conditions for peace in the region, the very least it could do would be to condemn the occupation and the settlements and halt their expansion; lift the siege on Gaza; stop extremist settler activities in Hebron, protect the Palestinians, and take into account the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu and Richard Falk that all of those who have committed crimes against humanity must be brought to justice.

Mr. Tiendrébéogo (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): I, too, would like to thank Mr. Serry for his briefing. My delegation is also grateful to the representatives of Palestine and Israel for their contributions.

Only two days ago, the Security Council adopted resolution 1850 (2008) on the situation in the Middle East. That important resolution invites the parties to continue negotiations within the framework of the Annapolis process, but it can achieve its objectives

only with the decisive involvement of the parties and the international community. With resolve and determination, Israelis and Palestinians can succeed in achieving peaceful coexistence and comprehensive peace, having been able to maintain regular contact during 2008.

Along with the Annapolis agreements, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Quartet Road Map, there is now a framework for the process and a means to achieve the goals. The commitment of each of the parties is well known and their responsibilities are known as well, especially when it comes to strengthening mutual trust. For its part, the international community must support them decisively and continue its efforts for the socio-economic development of Palestine, including by strengthening its institutional capacities and providing assistance to Palestinian refugees and to the population of Gaza.

In the regional sphere, we welcome the general calm currently prevailing in Lebanon as a result of the efforts of the Lebanese people and parties. It will continue and gain in strength so long as the Doha Accord is fully applied. We urge the parties, in particular, to overcome their differences in order to prepare the legislative elections of May 2009 in a peaceful manner. At the same time, improving relations between Lebanon and its neighbours would help to strengthen peace and stability in the country and throughout the region. For that reason, we welcome and encourage the initiatives undertaken in that respect. We urge Israel and Syria to become part of that same process in order to ensure the success of the indirect negotiations undertaken under the auspices of Turkey.

The countries of the region are destined to live together and must therefore take the necessary measures to facilitate a coexistence that would guarantee peace and security for each and for all. In that respect, the role of the United Nations will remain crucial. Notably, the United Nations is making a valuable contribution to stability in the Middle East through the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. We appeal once again to all of the parties to cooperate fully with those Forces.

The year that is coming to an end has seen some progress in the resolution of major crises in the region. However, many challenges remain. Primarily with respect to the Palestinian question, we express the wish that 2009 will keep the spirit of Annapolis alive with the objective of creating a Palestinian State living side by side with the State of Israel in peace and security.

With the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008), the Security Council should be in a position to support the parties and the process in a more committed, more visible and especially more tangible manner.

Mr. Grauls (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I, too, would like to thank Mr. Serry for his very useful and detailed briefing and my Israeli and Palestinian colleagues for their statements.

Two days after a debate focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and despite our ongoing concern over the humanitarian and security situation on the ground, especially in and around the Gaza Strip, I will avoid repeating the detailed position of Belgium on the issue, especially since it was broadly reflected in the statement made by the representative of France on behalf of the European Union, to which my delegation fully subscribes. I would rather take advantage of the briefing we have received to forecast the opportunities and challenges in the Middle East that await us in 2009.

The first observation is that we are seeing international commitment at a level unseen since the beginning of the millennium. There have been five summit meetings of the Quartet in a single year, including a meeting with the direct briefing of the parties on the status of negotiations. That included the direct involvement of the international community with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, already reflected in the reactivation of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee and in the discussion of Palestinian reform plans.

In support of those two forums, four successive ministerial conferences have been convened in Annapolis, Paris, Berlin and London to give the greatest possible political and economic support to the negotiations, alongside the investment conferences in Bethlehem and London and the economic recovery plan of Tony Blair, Representative of the Quartet.

Finally, after having been too long the symbol of paralysing disagreement on the part of the international community, the Security Council — our Security Council — recalled last Tuesday that it remains seized of the matter. We thus welcome the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008), in that it confirms the

Council's responsibility to help in the realization of the solution of two viable States living side by side in peace and security.

In a period of transition that is inevitably more fragile, Belgium, along with its European partners, advocates maintaining this international commitment. We could begin by seeing to it that the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008) does not remain window dressing without a future. On the contrary, it should strengthen the ability of our Council to shoulder its responsibilities in accordance with the Charter and see to it that its previous resolutions are implemented.

Our second observation touches upon the reaffirmation of the regional commitment in the quest for stabilization and a complete, just and lasting peace with Israel. Resolution 1850 (2008) recalled the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative. We can once again hail the commitment of the sponsors of the Initiative to reaffirm it at the Riyadh summit in March 2007. But the sense of responsibility of the regional players does not stop there.

Under the aegis of Turkey, indirect negotiations have begun between Israel and Syria. There has been a renewal of contacts after eight years of silence. We hope that a fifth session will soon bring them close to direct discussions with a view to a peace agreement.

In Lebanon, after violence that we feared would lead to a new civil war, mediation by Qatar helped in the election of a new President and in renewing national dialogue. Since then, a constructive dialogue has begun with Syria. We encourage the fulfilment of the commitments entered into in Damascus for the normalization of bilateral relations, including the establishment of diplomatic relations. Beyond that, and in view of the impact on regional peace and security, we emphasize increased cooperation for the monitoring of the Lebanese-Syrian border and respect for the arms embargo approved in resolution 1701 (2006). On this specific item, and more generally because of its role in the region, we call upon Iran to use its influence constructively and in support of peace.

Finally, with regard to Palestinian reconciliation, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt have successively shown the Arab commitment to reunifying the Gaza Strip and the West Bank within the fold of the Palestinian Authority. Based on the observation that we cannot have a lasting peace without involving the entire Palestinian people, we urge the continuation of these Arab efforts, and we encourage Hamas to have a sense of responsibility for not depriving Gazans of the peace dividends.

In this context, Belgium welcomes the confirmation of the organization of an international meeting in 2009 in Moscow. Without prejudging the progressive stabilization of various hotbeds of regional tension, we hope that that meeting will allow for the identification of the way in which we can integrate them into a comprehensive and mutual stabilization in the Middle East. Already, together with our European partners, we are prepared to work with the parties in order to offer them the international safeguards necessary for making progress in this direction.

Mr. Churkin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are grateful to the Secretariat and the United Nations Special Coordinator, Mr. Serry, for the briefing given us on the situation in the Middle East. We agree with his evaluation of the recent events in Palestinian-Israeli relations and also on the Syrian-Lebanese track.

The position of the Russian Federation with regard to the situation in the Middle East was given by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sergey Lavrov, in his statement to the Security Council on 16 December (*see S/PV.6045*). Therefore, I shall limit my statement to a few remarks.

Of course, near the end of 2008, we would like to have obtained more results from the Annapolis process, and we agree with the concern over the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories and the continued settlement activities. We are also concerned over the rocket attacks into Israel. But it is still important that, in taking stock of the past year, the international community be able to make some important observations.

Russia is pleased with the results of the ministerial meeting of the Quartet that took place on 15 December and its declaration, and Council resolution 1850 (2008), adopted on 16 December. We are grateful to those Member States of the Security Council that supported this resolution, drafted by the Russian Federation and the United States. In both documents, we see set forth the primacy and the irreversibility of the peace process in the Middle East, which was designed to ensure the existence of two States, Palestinian and Jewish, living in good-neighbourliness, peace and security. We are convinced

that the parties must continue their painstaking work in seeking mutually acceptable solutions to all essential items on the bilateral agenda.

We cannot allow the political process in the region to stall. Therefore, the Quartet and the Security Council have reaffirmed their commitment to continue and intensify joint efforts, which include regard for the recently reaffirmed Arab Peace Initiative, which was designed to establish the best possible atmosphere for continuing the Arab-Israeli dialogue on all tracks in 2009.

It is incumbent upon the international community, and particularly the Quartet, to help to ensure that the negotiation process continue without interruption. Russia unswervingly upholds a policy that favours the Quartet's consistent fulfilment of the mission for which it was in fact created.

The Quartet must energetically tackle the issues of the establishment of a just peace and security in the region, especially in the current serious circumstances. We will in future try to enhance the effectiveness of the Quartet and to support the efforts of Special Representative Blair and the development of its close cooperation with the League of Arab States in finding a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement, including the organization of an international conference on the Middle East in the capital of Russia in 2009.

One of the priority issues in the context of a Middle East settlement is the restoration of an intra-Palestinian agreement on the basis of the observation of the criteria set forth by the Quartet. That and other urgent issues related to progress in the peace process in the Middle East will be discussed in the course of the forthcoming visit to Moscow of the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas.

Russia firmly and energetically supports the efforts of the President of Lebanon and the Government of National Unity to strengthen agreement, State institutions and the constitutional order in that country on the basis of a dialogue between the leading political forces and the ethnic and religious communities. We are prepared to continue to promote the strengthening of the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Lebanon, and also its peaceful, democratic and crisis-free development, which is in the interest of the Lebanese and the Middle East region as a whole. In fact, these ideas were imparted during a recent to visit to Moscow by the Lebanon's Defence Minister, Mr. Elias Al-Murr, with whom there was also discussion of issues of further development of cooperation between our countries.

Mr. Natalegawa (Indonesia): I wish to begin by joining previous speakers in thanking Mr. Robert Serry, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his important briefing. We welcome the convening of this open debate, which provides the opportunity for the general membership of the United Nations to express its views on an issue of great importance.

Despite many critical developments on the ground that have taken place in the region, the Security Council has, in the past few years, been fraught with silence in response to the Middle East conflict. It is our fervent hope that the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008) two days ago will signal the new beginning of a Council being able to assume its Charter-mandated responsibilities with respect to the situation in the Middle East.

Once again, as the parties proceed in their negotiations, we wish to underscore the need for the critical challenges on the ground to be urgently addressed.

The situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank remains a matter of profound concern. The humanitarian consequences of the Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip and the closures of the Gaza crossings have been grave and intolerable. The briefing by the Special Coordinator just now chronicled the sufferings endured by the civilian population in the Gaza Strip. The siege must be lifted immediately in order to allow the civilian population in Gaza to have access to water, employment, commerce, medical treatment and education — essentially, access to their basic needs. It is also imperative that the Egyptian-brokered maintenance of calm in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel be maintained.

Steps that could undermine confidence or prejudice the outcome of negotiations must be stopped and reversed. It is critical that any actions, activities or statements that could undermine or hamper the peace efforts be avoided. In that connection, Israeli settlement activities in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, that contravene international law and the principles of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force must end. The construction of walls on Palestinian land, which is in contrary to the

Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, must cease and the walls be removed.

We draw some encouragement from the recent release of 227 Palestinians by the Israeli authorities. However, my delegation remains concerned over the fate of thousands of other Palestinians still imprisoned by Israel and calls for their similar release.

Ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and the creation of an independent, viable and democratic Palestine are central to the creation of peace in the region. In anticipating the creation of a Palestinian State, we underline the importance of international assistance to the institution-building activities in Palestine, including facilitating economic development through an improvement of conditions on the ground.

My delegation also cannot overemphasize how incredibly important unity among Palestinians is. We support all efforts to achieve that end. We are aware that the inter-Palestinian dialogue planned for November was postponed and has been rescheduled for December 2008. We are hopeful that the dialogue can be fully implemented as planned.

We recognize the vital role that Quartet has been playing in the promotion of solutions to the conflict in the Middle East that are acceptable to all parties. We welcome the regular consultations among the Quartet principals, including the recent meeting in New York. My delegation also commends the League of Arab States and individual countries in the region for their important contributions to the Middle East peace efforts. We attach particular importance to the Arab Peace Initiative.

With regard to Lebanon, my delegation welcomes the overall political stability in the country as the new unity Government continues to function. We attach primary importance to the continued efforts to promote dialogue and reconciliation involving all Lebanese factions across political, religious and ideological lines.

We look forward to the implementation of the 15 October 2008 agreement between Lebanon and Syria on formalizing the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. My delegation also underlines the importance of the indirect talks between Israel and Syria. Israel is called upon to fully comply with all the relevant Security Council resolutions relating to the Lebanese and Syrian tracks.

The Middle East conflict has endured for far too long, and ending it warrants our serious efforts. My delegation consistently believes that finding a peaceful, just, lasting and comprehensive settlement to the Middle East conflict is of primary importance. Indonesia will remain committed to its role and contribution, within and beyond the Security Council, to the efforts to attain comprehensive and sustainable peace in the region, based on the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), the Madrid terms of reference and the principle of land for peace.

Mr. Liu Zhenmin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): First I wish to thank Mr. Serry for his briefing.

The Chinese delegation welcomes the convening of this open debate. The Security Council has just held, on Tuesday of this week, a ministerial meeting on the situation in the Middle East, at which it adopted resolution 1850 (2008). At that meeting, China's Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. He Yafei, fully set out the position and views of the Chinese Government (*see S/PV.6045*). Today I shall just stress the following four points.

First, China welcomes the Council's adoption of resolution 1850 (2008). At a time when the Middle East situation is at a crucial juncture and faces many uncertain elements, the resolution sends a strong and clear signal for maintaining the momentum of political negotiations on the question of the Middle East. That demonstrates the Council's determination to push for a lasting peace in the Middle East and its firm support for political negotiations between Palestine and Israel. It also reflects the broad consensus in the international community in support of the peaceful coexistence of two States, Palestine and Israel. We are confident that the resolution, together with other relevant Council resolutions, will become part of the legal framework for a just solution of the Middle East question.

Secondly, we support the view expressed by some countries that what is more important than the actual adoption of the resolution is to ensure that it is implemented. Israel and Palestine should live up to the expectations of the international community by persevering in and intensifying the political negotiation process, as is called for in the resolution. We expect

both sides to overcome any obstacle to ensure that the negotiating process is irreversible.

The Council also faces tests in that regard. The Council should play its due role on the question of the Middle East, especially in ensuring that its resolutions are respected and implemented. We hope that the Council will be more active in supporting the negotiating process between Israel and Palestine. We also hope that the Quartet will further strengthen communication and coordination with the Council.

Thirdly, efforts to push for political negotiations should be accompanied by efforts to improve the situation on the ground and to strengthen the Palestinian capacity. We urge Israel, as the occupying Power, to take responsible action on the matter of settlements. We are concerned at the plight facing the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza. We call on the international community to continue to provide Palestine with assistance, including humanitarian, development and technical assistance. In Gaza the immediate task is to ensure that the period of calm is respected and extended. In the longer term, the more important task is to vigorously seek ways to strengthen the internal unity of Palestine.

Fourthly, a lasting peace in the Middle Ease is by necessity a comprehensive peace. Achieving peace between Syria and Israel, and between Lebanon and Israel, is an important component of the Middle East peace process. We expect Syria and Israel, and Lebanon and Israel, to improve their relationships through peace negotiations. We call on the international community to exert greater diplomatic efforts in that regard. The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 has further, untapped potential. We expect the League of Arab States and the countries of the region to play an important role in pushing for a solution of the Middle East question.

Mr. Weisleder (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation wishes to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this open debate. We also wish to thank, as other delegations have done, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Robert Serry, for presenting his report, and the representatives of Israel and Palestine for their statements.

The Security Council's consideration of the situation in the Middle East in 2008 culminated in the adoption of resolution 1850 (2008). We hope 2009 will bring the results that many of us had hoped for in 2008, and that the Council will be preparing to become an effective part of the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Costa Rica believes that it is the parties' responsibility to implement the provisions of the resolution. Full compliance with Security Council resolutions and international law, in particular international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as with the outcome of the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace and the Arab Peace Initiative is the right way to consolidate an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

In this time of political transition, we can only continue to support the bilateral negotiation process between senior authorities of Israel and Palestine so that they can agree on the core issues in the context of genuine and constructive negotiations. We must therefore isolate and weaken extremists wherever they may be.

I reiterate Costa Rica's conviction that there is a strong link between political prospects for peace and the socio-economic and humanitarian situation on the ground. Only yesterday, we were told that crossings between Gaza and Israel remain closed. Costa Rica understands Israel's concern for its own security, and in that respect has appealed emphatically for an end to the rocket and mortar attacks on southern Israel. We also vigorously condemn any statement undermining Israel's existence as a State or threatening its right to exist. It is nevertheless unacceptable that Israel should cite its valid security concerns to justify measures that indiscriminately effect an entire people, in contravention of international humanitarian law.

My delegation takes this opportunity to urge the parties to extend the fragile calm achieved in Gaza and southern Israel thanks to the good office of Egypt, which has played a very constructive role in this matter. Costa Rica welcomes Israel's recent release of 227 Palestinian prisoners, which we believe represents a gesture of support for President Abbas and for those who, like him, distance themselves from all unproductive extremism and are working hard to achieve a stable and sustainable peace in the Middle East. The international community must support and strengthen the voices of moderation in Israel, Palestine and the wider region calling for the building of peace, and not those that clamour for war and violence.

We remain optimistic that we shall see the renewal of indirect peace talks between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic in 2009, under the auspices of Turkey and in a climate of positive and constructive discussion. We therefore hope that senior officials of those countries will begin direct conversations that will help to build a bridge leading to a comprehensive solution encompassing all aspects of the question of the Middle East.

With respect to Lebanon, Costa Rica hopes that the parties will continue to demonstrate political will fully to implement resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006). We also hope that the Special Envoys of the Secretary-General will pursue their ongoing consultations with Governments that can persuade the Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias in Lebanon to cooperate peacefully in the disarmament process.

In conclusion, Costa Rica expresses the hope that 2009 will be the year that reveals the truth of the adage that the night is always darkest before the dawn.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): Two days ago, this Council, after almost five years, finally adopted a resolution on the situation between Palestine and Israel. At that meeting, my delegation acknowledged that the resolution that we adopted was not perfect because it ignored many significant issues that this Council must address. These include the continuing illegal settlement activity in the Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem. The siege of Gaza continues. In Hebron, Israeli settlers have attacked Palestinian homes and farms. Violence against Palestinian and Israeli civilians has not ended.

However, what the resolution did was to remind the parties of their previous undertakings and to recommit them to the obligations that they had previously undertaken. Palestinian and Israeli leaders alike have already committed to what they see as the final outcome of their negotiations — a settlement that will result in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours. That settlement will resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and end the occupation that began in 1967. That commitment has been made in the past and continues to be the basis of the current negotiations.

New declarations and undertakings are no longer required. What remains is the need to implement the steps taken to reach such a settlement — a settlement that will be based on the undertakings of the parties, their neighbours and the international community, such as the Arab Peace Initiative. It is thus imperative that both sides ensure that their actions and pronouncements be calculated to advance the quest for peace. Unjustified and illegal acts by Israel — such as its siege of Gaza; continued incursions into the West Bank and, recently, in Gaza; and the expansion of illegal settlements, military checkpoints and the separation wall — contribute to the continuing cycle of violence.

We recognize the legitimate security concerns of Israel, but we do not condone the disproportionate use of force to achieve that security. Israel's right to self-defence does not entitle it to violate the rights of innocent civilians, particularly those who have been living in inhumane conditions under its military occupation for more than 40 years.

As we said two days ago, the resolution we adopted will face two crucial tests. The first will be whether the parties will implement its provisions; the second test will be for the Council to ensure that its resolutions are implemented. If its resolutions should be ignored, that would further erode the credibility of this Council.

Mr. Arias (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, allow me to thank you, Sir, for having convened this meeting. I also thank the Ambassadors of Israel and Palestine for their respective statements. I further thank Special Coordinator Serry for his consistently comprehensive and balanced reports.

Panama has stated on various occasions and reiterates today that even though a solution to the conflict in the Middle East, in particular the conflict between Israel and Palestine, may not necessarily lead to the resolution of all other conflicts in the world, it is nevertheless true that unless that conflict is resolved with agreement among the parties, the conflicts in the rest of the world are unlikely to be solved.

Likewise, we have said and we repeat today that the framework of a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine is generally well known and supported by a large part of the international community, as reflected at the Annapolis conference. That framework includes the existence of Israel and Palestine as two economically and politically viable States living side by side and with their neighbours in peace and

security; the return to the borders of 1967, except in the case of a specific agreement between the parties; and West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian State. Furthermore, it will be necessary to reach agreement on the future of Palestinian refugees and the use and exploitation of natural resources in the region, in particular water.

However, if that agreement is to be successful, the parties must achieve the following as soon as possible, if not immediately. The Palestinians must reach a political agreement among themselves that would make it possible to consolidate a single and sustainable Government structure for the whole Palestinian territory. The Israelis must suspend the construction of illegal settlements in the occupied territories and begin removing those settlements, whose existence is unjustifiable and clearly violates international law. Extremist Palestinian groups must stop their acts of violence against innocent Israeli civilians. The Palestinians and the Arab countries must give Israel the necessary and reliable guarantees of its security as a State. Until those conditions are met, the peace efforts in the Middle East are bound to fail.

In that regard, Panama reiterates once again its deep concern at and condemnation of the situation of the people of Gaza under the Israeli blockade of that territory. We condemn equally strongly the terrorist attacks on the Jewish people by extremists based in the Gaza Strip. We recognize the State of Israel's inherent right to self-defence in accordance with the Charter and international law, in proportion to the threat and in full respect of the human rights of the innocent civilian population.

In conclusion, we trust that those who believe that neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis wish or are able to reach a peace agreement are wrong.

Mr. Bui The Giang (Viet Nam): I join previous speakers in thanking Mr. Robert Serry for his informative and detailed briefing.

As the Council is reviewing a month that saw a wide array of developments across the region, my delegation recognizes the commitment of Palestine and Israel to carrying forward bilateral negotiations into 2009, the strengthened efforts of the Palestinian Authority in preparation for statehood, the recent decision of Israel to evacuate illegal settlers from Hebron and release more than 200 Palestinian prisoners, and the continued cooperation between both parties in enhancing the rule of law and security sector reforms in Jenin.

We take note of the affirmation by the Quartet in its statement of 15 December 2008 that a final treaty and a lasting peace would be reached through simultaneous and mutually re-enforcing efforts on the basis of peaceful negotiations, the institutional building of a Palestinian State and the implementation of the obligations of both parties under the Road Map and the Annapolis joint understanding.

We welcome resolution 1850 (2008), adopted two days ago by the Council, the first resolution on the situation in the Middle East after a gap of almost five years. We consider it, despite its understandable imperfections, a good basis on which all relevant parties can overcome setbacks and achieve further concrete results. Thus, if and when the resolution is strictly implemented, it will contribute practically to realizing the vision of an independent, viable and sovereign State of Palestine, living side by side and in peace with Israel and the wider Middle East, whose constituent nations remain at peace with each other and with the world at large.

An honest assessment of the current situation regrettably reveals the extent of obstacles ahead. My delegation fully shares Mr. Robert Serry's recognition of and grave concern over the many problems still prevailing in the region. In that context, it is our view that the success of the peace process will require prompt effort by the international community to rectify the aggravating situation in the occupied Palestinian territory and commit Israel to its obligations under the Road Map and related provisions of international law, including, inter alia, an immediate end to all settlement activities, the removal of obstacles to freedom of access and movement, and the reopening of border crossings to end the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

The parties concerned must also refrain from any act that may vitiate the atmosphere for a result-oriented dialogue based on mutual confidence and trust, and explore every possible way to maintain constructive negotiations so as to arrive at a just and sustainable solution in keeping with resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1515 (2003) and 1850 (2008), the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative, the Road Map and the other agreements that have been concluded.

While the resolution of the six-decade tragedy of Palestine would have a profound impact on the situation in the Middle East, peace in the region also requires forward movement on the other axes of the peace process. In that regard, we commend regional efforts facilitated by Turkey to re-energize the Syria-Israel track and those to resume good-faith negotiations on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. We call upon the international community to support in the coming months the positive steps taken by the Lebanese Government to fully assert authority over its territory and to promote the national course of reconciliation, political stability, socio-economic development and regional and international integration.

We urge all the parties concerned to strictly observe resolution 1701 (2006), put an end to those acts that may further complicate that process, including the targeted attacks against Lebanese civilians and personnel of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, violations of Lebanese airspace, the continued detention of prisoners and the unresolved status of the Shab'a Farms. While we know that much remains to be done, at the same time we have confidence in the wisdom and determination of the Lebanese people and in the cooperation and assistance of the United Nations, the Quartet, the League of Arab States, regional countries and the international community in ensuring that the tragic past of Lebanon is never repeated.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Croatia.

Today's meeting comes at the end of an eventful year marked by a number of encouraging developments in the Middle East. Croatia joined the Council at a time that was marked by renewed hope for reaching comprehensive peace in the Middle East. Under strong United States leadership, we have witnessed the development of a comprehensive, direct and result-oriented Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process within the framework set out in Annapolis a year ago.

The parties have built a solid framework for negotiations and have direct, serious and substantive talks regularly and at all levels. We applaud their unwavering commitment to peace.

On the regional front, important regional tracks have opened between Israel and Syria and between Syria and Lebanon. In Lebanon, the adoption of the Doha Agreement led to developments that hold the promise of a renewed era of democracy, genuine national reconciliation and stabilization.

A series of high-level meetings this week reaffirmed the international community's commitment to the shared goal of a two-State solution and lasting peace in the Middle East. Two days ago, the Council adopted resolution 1850 (2008), an important benchmark in the peace process that endorsed those achievements and expressed support for the irreversibility and continuation of the Annapolis process and its guiding principles. To complement that process, it also urges an intensification of efforts to foster mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence in the region.

The resolution came at a critical point when all efforts should be channelled into preserving momentum and establishing an environment that will enable the parties to continue to build on the progress achieved while being guided by the principles and the mutual understanding reflected in resolution 1850 (2008) and in the Quartet's statement of 9 November 2008.

We recognize the challenges that the parties face on their journey, even more so now as they embark upon a sensitive period of political transition. We understand that the political and diplomatic processes remain inextricably linked with the situation on the ground, and hope to see tangible changes in accordance with the obligations to which both parties have committed themselves under the Road Map and reaffirmed in Annapolis.

The deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation in Gaza and the renewed rocket attacks on southern Israel, including dozens this week alone, which have an impact of the activities of United Nations agencies and humanitarian assistance operations, remain a serious concern.

Furthermore, we understand that development and peace are mutually reinforcing and that economic development is an essential part of a lasting solution. That is why the continuing international engagement remains critical, to stimulate both Palestinian economic renewal and the reform processes, notably in the sphere of security and the rule of law. We hope to see the success of Jenin, Nablus and Hebron replicated elsewhere. The ability of the Palestinian Authority to build credible institutions and a security infrastructure that is willing and able to combat terrorism and other

threats is both an essential element of Palestinian State-building and a legitimate expectation on the Israeli side.

While respecting the integrity of the bilateral negotiations, we should not forget the regional dimension of the process. The efforts of responsible regional partners to secure just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, including the Arab Peace Initiative, are a valuable complement to the ongoing peace process.

In many of its aspects, the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a defining conflict of our time. Tensions in the region reverberate globally. That makes the irresponsible and threatening rhetoric coming from the Iranian leadership all the more alarming.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate our belief in the ongoing peace process. To quote Prime Minister Ivo Sanader of Croatia and others, this is the best chance we have. The parties have set into motion a momentum that we cannot afford to lose. They deserve our full support on their journey. We have a clear shared goal to turn into reality the vision of two States, a democratic and peaceful Palestine living side by side with a democratic and secure Israel, and to advance the momentum towards just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to you, Mr. President, for presiding over the Security Council this month. I would also like to thank the Permanent Representative of Costa Rica and all the members of his delegation for having guided the work of the Council last month with great skill and wisdom. I also wish to thank Mr. Robert Serry, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for the briefing he has given us.

Syria has chosen peace as a strategic option and has expressed its readiness to achieve it since its participation in the Madrid Conference, 17 years ago. We did so also in the run-up to the 2002 Arab summit in Beirut, which launched the Arab Peace Initiative. That Initiative illustrates the clear desire of Arab States to achieve peace once Israel demonstrates genuine readiness to comply with the just peace requirements, including by withdrawing from all occupied Arab territories to the 4 June 1967 lines and enabling the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, with Al-Quds as its capital.

At the Arab summit held in Damascus on 29 March 2008, Arab leaders reiterated the need to achieve a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East on the basis of resolutions of international legality, the Arab Peace Initiative and the principles of the Madrid Conference. The Council may recall that, when the Arab Peace Initiative was launched in Beirut in 2002, Israel's response was to invade the West Bank and to carry out massacres in and lay siege to Jenin and Nablus, while also killing unarmed Palestinian women and children, desecrating places of worship and implementing a scorched-earth policy, in addition to detention and collective punishment.

Israel has continued to build settlements despite the repudiation of the international community. It is also continuing construction of its apartheid wall of separation on occupied Palestinian territory, in blatant disregard of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Having lately and abruptly discovered its virtues, Israel also responded to the Arab Peace Initiative by brazenly attacking Lebanon in the summer of 2006 in an attempt to undermine all efforts at peace. Israel has also continued to reject calls to withdraw from occupied Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan, while increasing settlement activities therein.

As we meet again today, the entire world is witness to what Israel, the occupying Power, is doing to the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank: imposing a siege, causing hunger and starvation, destroying property, carrying out extrajudicial killings, detaining Palestinians and forcibly displacing them at a rate unprecedented in modern history. It is doing so through its use of organized State terrorism against unarmed Palestinians. Before the eyes of the occupying Power, settlers continue to attack Palestinians, Muslim and Christian alike, as well as their holy places.

On 25 November 2008, on the instructions of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic in his capacity as chair of the Arab summit in Damascus, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Syria sent identical letters to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council calling on the United Nations to assume its responsibilities with regard to Israel's inhuman and

immoral actions in Gaza. The Minister recalled that Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip, including the complete closure of all crossing points, is a collective threat to the lives of Palestinians that has led to a grave deterioration of all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip, including the humanitarian situation, thereby increasing the suffering of Palestinians. That collective punishment includes the cutting off of potable water, electricity, food, medical supplies and fuel; and has led to an increase in poverty, hunger and unemployment. Despite the efforts of the Secretary-General and his repeated calls to the occupying Power to put an end to such practices, it has not yet responded.

Thus, my country, the Syrian Arab Republic, stated in its message to this Council that it looks forward to immediate measures to be taken by the Council to address this humanitarian crisis, which is no less dangerous than other humanitarian catastrophes. The United Nations should act quickly in this crisis and pressure Israel to open the crossing points immediately.

The Syrian Arab Republic would like once again to reiterate its continuous and firm support for the right of the Palestinian people to the restoration of their occupied territory and to the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, with Al-Quds as its capital. The Syrian Arab Republic emphasizes the importance of restoring Palestinian national unity through national dialogue and reconciliation in order to strengthen the Palestinian negotiating position, support the will of the Palestinian people and end Israel's attempts to attack the Palestinian people and their aspirations. The Syrian Arab Republic, as chair of the Arab summit, is attempting to achieve that.

Israel continues, as the Council knows, its occupation of the Syrian Golan, flouting international law and resolutions, including resolution 497 (1981), which declared Israel's decision to annex the Syrian Golan as null and void and having no legal merit. Israel continues to disregard General Assembly resolution 62/85, which states that the ongoing Israeli occupation and annexation of the Syrian Golan as a fait accompli hamper the achievement of a just and comprehensive peace in the region, and calls on Israel to withdraw fully from the occupied Syrian Golan to the lines of 4 June 1967, in implementation of the relevant United Nations resolutions.

Israel continues to plunder the natural resources of the Golan, including its water resources, and to plant mines, which have led to 589 injuries, including 17 to children. Israel, the occupying Power, continues to bury nuclear waste in our occupied Golan.

We have identified these important and serious issues to the various specialized United Nations agencies, and we are still waiting for those agencies to take the necessary action, in keeping with their core mandates under the United Nations Charter.

It seems to us that the clearest possible expression of the truth, as stated by President Bashar Al-Assad, is that peace is not the major preoccupation of the Israeli Government. Its major preoccupation is security, in its narrowest sense: their security, which cannot be achieved, from their point of view, except at the expense of our rights and our security. It is unacceptable and illogical that we, the Arabs, should be called upon to provide evidence of our desire for peace, despite the fact that we have proclaimed it repeatedly and called for it on many occasions, in particular since the holding of the Madrid Conference in 1991. It is time for the Israelis to provide evidence of their desire for peace, to express, through their actions, their readiness to bring about peace and to convince us, the Arabs, of that readiness. The Israelis are the ones who are occupying our territory, committing aggression against our people and displacing millions of our people, and not the other way around. They undertake all these actions, and then they ask for protection and guarantees and use these as a smokescreen in order to pursue their extortion and obtain more concessions from us.

Despite all of this, the withdrawal of Israel from our occupied Syrian Golan to the 4 June 1967 lines and the achievement of peace is a national priority for the Syrian Arab Republic. We have therefore entered into indirect talks with Israel, through Turkish mediation, which we are thankful for. We would have liked to have agreed on a basis to start direct negotiations under the auspices of multiple international partners, but the matter requires an American will to make peace in the Middle East one of its top priorities. The United States must abandon the deliberate disregard and neglect that have been its practice for nearly seven years and led to the deterioration of the situation in the region.

Worse still, the United States occupation forces in Iraq committed an aggressive act against the Syrian Arab Republic on 26 October 2008, targeting a civilian building in the town of Abu Kamal. Labourers inside

the building were shot, eight Syrian civilians were killed and one was injured. This aggression was unjustified and constitutes a serious violation of Syrian sovereignty and of the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter. It demonstrates the insistence of the current United States presidency to pursue its policies until the last day of its administration. Those policies have led to nothing but death and destruction in the region and have only contributed to the rise of tensions, destabilization and chaos there.

The Syrian Arab Republic, which upholds international law, has appealed to the United Nations and the Security Council in particular to shoulder their responsibilities to prevent the repetition of this serious violation and to lay the responsibility for the killing of innocent Syrian civilians squarely on the aggressors in order to maintain security and stability in the Middle East.

Developments in the Middle East require the Security Council to assume its responsibility to maintain international peace and security, restore occupied territory to its legitimate owners and stop the Israeli aggressors from achieving their objectives. That is the only way to bring about a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East and to restore stability to that very important part of the world.

In conclusion, I believe that the representative of Israel has today once again used the forum of the Security Council to falsify the facts concerning the Israeli practices of organized State terrorism over the decades in the region. The representative of Israel believes falsely that by including the name of my country in her statement, she can divert attention from the root cause of the problem of violence and terrorism in our region, which is the Israeli occupation of Arab territories and the crimes against humanity that have been perpetrated by successive Israeli Governments against the unarmed people of Palestine in their occupied land, as described by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Richard Falk. The whole world knows that Israel is imposing an unjust siege and carrying out a sadistic and pathological holocaust against more than 1.5 million people in Gaza and a similar number in the West Bank. The occupying Israeli authorities have done nothing to stop the aggressive terrorist attacks committed by Israeli settlers against the Palestinians in Hebron and in other parts of the West Bank. Despite all of this, the representative of Israel tells us that the evacuation of one house of those hooligan settlers in Hebron is a great accomplishment that rises to the level of inventing the wheel or even landing on the surface of the moon.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Lebanese Republic.

Mr. Salam (Lebanon) (*spoke in Arabic*): Today, we meet once more for the monthly briefing of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East and primarily the question of Palestine. The most significant aspect of our meeting today is that the Council, after a long absence, acted to adopt resolution 1850 (2008) two days ago, which the Council has sought as a new framework for the negotiation track that started in Annapolis. The resolution was adopted despite its shortcomings, in the hope that it will provide the proper momentum.

It is important to note that the resolution mentions and reminds us of the main terms of reference for the establishment of a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, in particular the United Nations resolutions, the principles of the 1991 Madrid Conference and the Arab Peace Initiative, but, most importantly, it reactivates the role of the United Nations, and specifically the Security Council, in order to achieve the desired peace, a just and comprehensive peace. While we welcome the planned Moscow conference, we must also note that the resolution lacks a specific timeline for the achievement of peace and also lacks a clear call to put an end to Israeli occupation and a clear denunciation of Israeli practices against Palestinian civilians.

While the international community and the Group of Arab States, based on the Arab Peace Initiative, are seeking a political process that restores the land to its rightful owners and guarantees peace for everyone, Israel continues in the opposite direction. The situation on the ground provides ample evidence of that.

Israel allows continued construction and expansion of settlements. The number of new housing units in the settlements this year alone has grown by 3,000 units. Also, Israel continues its policy of confiscation of land and water resources in the West Bank. Israel continues its construction of the separation wall, in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, and continues to

dismantle and divide the West Bank through hundreds of checkpoints and barriers.

Even more dangerous is the increased violence of settlers, as occurred, for example, in the bloody events in Hebron, where settlers burned houses and fired weapons at Palestinian civilians. All these practices are not only grave violations of international law, but also, and more specifically, of Israeli commitments under the Road Map.

In this context, we heard the recent statement by the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Livni, where she brought to mind something similar to the policy of transfer. I would also mention the decision of the Israeli authorities to detain for 30 hours Mr. Richard Falk, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 and to remove him forcibly and prevent him from carrying out his mission as mandated by the United Nations itself. That is in addition to the continued blockade of Gaza and the subjection of its residents to the policy of collective punishment, which has been denounced internationally. The least that can be said of all of those practices is that they have escalated an already dangerous situation.

Israel continues to head in the opposite direction to peace, not only through its practices in Palestine and the continued occupation of the Golan, but also in my country. Despite the passage of more than two years since the adoption of resolution 1701 (2006), which ended the systematic destruction of Lebanese villages, infrastructure and civilian facilities in the summer of 2006, Israel continues its stubborn refusal to fulfil all its obligations under that resolution. It continues to violate the sovereignty of Lebanon. The total number of violations by Israel of Lebanese airspace over the last four months was more than 1,100 violations.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations has denounced those actions in paragraph 8 of his most recent report (S/2008/715) on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) and called them a violation of Lebanese sovereignty and of that resolution. We call for an immediate cessation of those violations. After the Lebanese Government had approved and accepted the proposal of the United Nations concerning the Israeli withdrawal from the northern part of al-Ghajar village, which gave Israel three months to respond, the response was to continue to violate Lebanese sovereignty and the contents of resolution 1701 (2006).

Also, the Shaba'a farms and the Kfar Shou Hills are still under Israeli occupation. It is time for United Nations, based on the provisional demarcati line determined by its own expert, to launch a n diplomatic initiative that allows the restoration of land to its rightful owners and puts an end to occupation. Additionally, Israel still refuses to provi maps showing the locations of millions of clus bombs that they dropped in South Lebanon, bombs t daily cause suffering and claim hundreds of victi including children.

Israeli officials continue to issue various thre against my country, including the statement of Israeli Prime Minister, in which he threatened destroy Lebanon, as well as statements by the Minis of Defence and military officials, which were subject of a letter from my Government to Secretary-General denouncing such statements challenges to the international community and work of the United Nations Interim Force in Leban (UNIFIL) in the area south of the Litani River.

The Council is well aware of Lebano commitment to and fulfilment of its internatio obligations, especially those emanating from resoluti 1701 (2006). The Lebanese army deployed forces the south and cooperates fully with UNIFIL, and have welcomed the recommendations of independent group for the evaluation of conditi along the borders. We continue with techni cooperation to strengthen monitoring mechanisms order to control the borders.

We have abided by the choice of a comprehens and just peace based on the Arab Peace Initiative. therefore choose to see the glass as half full, in form of the Security Council adoption of resoluti 1850 (2008). The Council now has the opportunity assume the role that we wish for it — the role actua required by the Charter of the Organization.

In the name of the peace that the people of region have longed for since the establishment of United Nations itself and in order for the Organizati to rise to the level of the legitimate expectations we have of the United Nations, we appeal to the Coun not to allow this new opportunity to become anot lost opportunity.

The President: I now give the floor to representative of Brazil.

Ms. Viotti (Brazil): I thank you, Mr. President, for convening this timely meeting. I also wish to thank the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, for presenting a thorough briefing on the situation in the region.

Brazil has long maintained close and multiple ties with countries and peoples in the Middle East. Approximately 10 million Brazilians find their roots in Arab lands, of which 6 to 7 million are the descendants of Lebanese or Syrian immigrants. The cooperation and friendship between my country and Israel, which dates back to the latter's creation, have also been recently strengthened. In Brazil, all communities live side by side in harmony and are fully integrated into society. We believe that this is also possible in the Middle East.

It is our shared history and the wealth of our political, economic and cultural relations with the Middle East that provide the foundation for our growing presence in and involvement with the region. Brazil was the first Latin American country to join the Arab League as an observer. In 2005, at the initiative of President Lula, the first South American and Arab Countries Summit was held in Brasilia, with a view to identifying and exploring synergies. The next summit will take place in Doha this coming March. In 2007, the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) signed a free trade agreement with Israel. It is this robust relationship with the Middle East that leads Brazil to contribute to international efforts designed to help Israelis and Palestinians end their conflict and to alleviate the plight of those living in the occupied territories. We attended the Annapolis conference, as well as the Palestinian Donors Conference in Paris a month later. On the latter occasion, we pledged $10 million, in addition to $3 million over three years, through the India-Brazil-South Africa Fund and offered enhanced technical cooperation to the Palestinian National Authority. We received over one hundred refugees from the Ruweished camp in Jordan, and only last week we disbursed a contribution of $200,000 for the Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon.

Brazil is convinced that there will be no peace in the Middle East before a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian question is reached on the basis of the Quartet Road Map, the Madrid terms of reference, the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative and relevant United Nations resolutions. We deeply regret that the Annapolis peace process will not be completed in the timeframe originally envisaged. However, we were encouraged by the Quartet's statement of 9 November, according to which the Israelis and Palestinians could set up "a solid negotiating structure for continued progress in the future". We were also reassured by the commitment of both parties to "vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations". This is crucial.

Brazil supports the Security Council in its commitment to the irreversibility of the bilateral negotiations, as stated in resolution 1850 (2008). The Council must ensure that such words are turned into deeds. The political leaders of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United States bear a special responsibility in assisting the Council in that formidable task.

We also join the Quartet's call for negotiations to be intensified. Brazil listened carefully to the resolution's call for all States to contribute to the negotiations and to the well-being of the Palestinians. Once again, we renew our readiness to cooperate fully and effectively with the parties and the international community.

It is imperative that Israelis and Palestinians fulfil their obligations under the performance-based Road Map, as stated in the Annapolis Joint Understanding. The parties must also refrain from any activity inconsistent with a future agreement based on the relevant resolutions of the Security Council. Settlement in the occupied territories must cease. It is also indispensable that all violence be stopped, including that committed by settlers. Humanitarian law must be strictly observed by all parties, in all cases.

We express our grave concern regarding the plight of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. We support the Secretary-General's call that a steady and sufficient supply of fuel and humanitarian assistance be allowed into Gaza and that the work of the United Nations be facilitated. Not only are several such measures required under international law and existing political commitments but they are also needed to ease negotiations. The peace process will be greatly strengthened if substantial improvement occurs in the situation on the ground, including in the West Bank. As we have done in the past, we condemn the launching of rockets against Israel this week.

Progress must also be made on other crucial tracks on which efforts are under way to decrease tension and eventually reach a comprehensive solution

to the interwoven challenges to peace and security. Palestinian reunification is indispensable and we praise Egypt for its good offices in this domain. Dialogue and understanding between Israel and Syria are also necessities. We commend Beirut and Damascus for recent steps toward the normalization of bilateral ties.

Resolution of the question of Palestine has eluded the international community for simply too long. Our inability to address this challenge effectively has had a negative impact and made it even more difficult to solve other problems in the region. Years and years of failed attempts to bring peace and stability to the Middle East risk eroding the credibility of the entire international community, as recently recalled by former President Martti Ahtisaari. We need just, lasting and comprehensive results and we need them now. Brazil is ready to continue making its contribution.

The President: There are still a number of speakers remaining on my list for this meeting. I intend, with the concurrence of the members of the Council, to suspend the meeting until 3 p.m.

The meeting was suspended at 1.05 p.m.